

MICHIGAN DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

FIELD SERVICES: Operationalizing a New Approach to Service

The Office of Field Services is responsible for assuring that the resources available to schools and school districts are focused and targeted on improved student learning for all students. The Office addresses this responsibility from both a very practical perspective and a comprehensive perspective. From the practical perspective, the Office of Field Services is responsible for the implementation of nine federal and state categorical educational programs (federal: Title I-Disadvantaged Children, Title I-Migrant, Title I-Neglected & Delinquent, Title II-Eisenhower Mathematics & Science, Title VI-Innovative Strategies, Title VII-Bilingual, Title VII-Emergency Immigrant; state: At Risk, Bilingual). This responsibility includes applying to the U. S. Department of Education (USDOE) for federal program funds; distribution of funds to school districts; oversight of the appropriate utilization of the funds; and reporting financial and programmatic results. From a comprehensive viewpoint, the available resources include more than just the nine categorical funding programs; the target population is enlarged to include all students, and the implementation plan is the school district's own school improvement plan. This more comprehensive viewpoint requires that the Field Services staff approach each school and school district with the necessary knowledge and skills to help that school or district determine where it is in the school improvement process, what its immediate needs are, and how to best assist the district. In order to provide this type of service, the Field Services staff will have to be knowledgeable about state, regional and local resources that are, or could be, available to the school or district. With a major emphasis being placed on customer service, the Field Services consultants are prepared to play the roles of leader, facilitator, coordinator and/or supporter, depending on the other services that the school district is using or has available.

The Office of Field Services is prepared to assume both the practical and the comprehensive responsibilities as it serves school districts. The practical responsibilities reflect how this work has often been addressed in the past from a categorical point of view, which can lead to a somewhat narrow and limited perspective, albeit with-, very important responsibilities. The comprehensive approach will address many of the same issues; but always with the focus on the goals of the school improvement process and improved learning for all students. From the perspectives of both the practical and comprehensive approaches, the Office of Field Services advocates for at-risk populations and their inclusion in the attainment of the school's learning objectives for all students.

Origins of the Field Services Concept

The *Improving America's Schools Act of 1994* made provisions for states to submit to the USDOE a consolidated application for the Act's various funding programs, provided that the states also allowed school districts to use a consolidated application in applying to the states. The Michigan Department of Education (MDE) took advantage of this opportunity to submit a consolidated application to the USDOE and to develop a consolidated application for Michigan school districts. The preparation of the consolidated application for Michigan school districts required the staff of several offices and programs to plan and work together. It became apparent to the staff developing the consolidated application that the approach the MDE had used in the past for administering these programs was unnecessarily complicated and did little to support program coordination as called for in the Act. MDE staff quickly began to see ways that the application and grant management processes could be simplified; more importantly, they began to see ways in which programs and resources could be coordinated to increase their effectiveness. When the MDE initiated a strategic planning effort in August, 1996, the concept of bringing the various categorical functions together into one administrative unit quickly surfaced. This concept developed into a proposal to create an Office of Field Services. An MDE transition team developed the Field Services concept between March and July of 1997. The State Board of Education approved the reorganization of the Department of Education, which included the creation of the Office of Field Services, in December 1997.

What Field Services Hopes to Accomplish

The Office of Field Services will provide the services and assistance that the various separate program offices have previously offered. These services include information about program requirements, assistance with applying for funding, program planning, appropriate use of funds and advocating for at-risk students. The Field Services approach to assisting schools and school districts will work to focus assistance on student learning and school improvement, and will emphasize the coordination of resources. This will include the specific categorical resources that are the direct responsibility of Field Services and other financial and nonfinancial resources as well. Assistance will also be provided with the implementation of School Improvement Plans. The Field Services consultants will be able to inform and assist school districts with other State initiatives and help to reduce some of the complexities of dealing with a large state bureaucracy. Field Services consultants will also work with a small number of targeted schools with low student achievement levels. This work may take the form of sustained direct assistance, facilitating or supporting an ongoing assistance program, or facilitating or supporting the adoption of a comprehensive school reform model.

The Field Services Delivery System

The Office of Field Services emphasizes customer service as it plans and implements its delivery system. Each school district has a designated consultant who will be able to assist with the categorical funding programs; the coordination of resources; the implementation of school improvement processes; information about other state programs; problem solving; and identification and development of resources. Each Field Services consultant is a member of a team of consultants and will be able to access the skills and expertise of other team members in assisting school districts. The regional services component of Field Services is comprised of five teams. In addition, another Department of Education based team, Central Support, assists and supports the regional consultants as they work with schools and school districts. Staff for the Office of Field Services are selected based on their general knowledge and understanding about schools, school districts, and teaching and learning. They each also bring specialized skills and expertise that strengthen their team's capabilities. In staffing Field Services, the goal is to have a balance of consultants with state level experience and those with recent district level experience.

The development of the Field Services concept and delivery system has involved, and will continue to involve, many of the educational groups and organizations that are stakeholders of the delivery system. Likewise, the Field Services consultants approach the delivery of services and assistance from a perspective of including educational stakeholders in the planning and implementation processes. For state level planning and development purposes, the involvement of local school districts, intermediate school districts, educational organizations, leaders in school reform and Department of Education staff has been sought. At the school district level, participation of administrators, teachers, parents and students will be encouraged.

Continuous Improvement and Continuous Learning

The Field Services delivery system has been designed to incorporate continuous improvement and continuous teaming as essential components. Staff of Field Services participate in an intensive initial training program which is followed by ongoing professional development. The topics for training and professional development are identified by the staff and the needs of the school districts. A service review process, which includes regular feedback from the customers, analysis of results and proposed improvement of the services, has been incorporated into the delivery system. The operationalizing of the Field Services concept is an ongoing process which is intended to change and improve over time. The intended result is better service to schools and school districts to assist them with improving student learning for all students.

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May, 1998*